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ABSTRACT

This report points to recent social, economic, and technological changes in Canadian society that have produced significant challenges to higher education, and provides recommendations for improving the educational climate of higher education institutions and classrooms. It presents background information on positive learning environments and suggests ways educational administrators and faculty can create climates based on mutual respect. To promote positive learning environments, institutions need to form committees that include people from all sectors of the institution, analyze the culture of the organization, examine the literature and evaluate existing policies, decide what would work best within the budget, determine timelines, and create a plan of action. Faculty should promote a positive learning climate in the classroom by getting to know students, celebrating student diversity, distributing and following well-organized syllabi, building student self-esteem, creating team spirit, and paying attention to the dynamics of class discussions. (Contains 32 references.) (MDM)

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Creating a Positive Climate for Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

Faced with increasing social, technical, and economic diversity in our society, educators in universities and community colleges are challenged to find ways to maintain and improve the quality of teaching and to foster relationships built on trust. Although there are many possible answers to the challenges, one worth promoting and developing is the creation of positive learning environments within post-secondary organizations and classrooms. The purpose of this article is to present background information on positive learning environments and to suggest ways educational administrators and faculty can create positive climates based on mutual respect.

Sommaire

Face aux diversités sociales, techniques et économiques dans notre société, les éducateurs dans les universités et les collèges communautaires cherchent les moyens de maintenir et d'améliorer la qualité de l'enseignement tout en promouvant les relations interpersonnelles fondées sur la confiance. Bien qu'il y ait de nombreuses solutions possibles, une solution qui mérite d'être avancée et développée est la création des environnements d'apprentissage positifs dans les institutions et les salles de classe. Le but de cet article est de présenter quelques idées sur de tels environnements et d'offrir aux administrateurs et professeurs des suggestions pour créer des climats positifs basés sur le respect mutuel.

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Recent social, economic, and technological changes in Canadian society have produced significant challenges to higher education. At the national level, several agencies concerned about the mediocre performance of Canadian students on international tests in mathematics and sciences and the substantial differences in achievement among the provinces claim that there are serious inequalities in learning opportunities across Canada. The Economic Council of Canada has produced two reports, *Education* and *Training in Canada* and *A Lot to Learn* (1992), designed to assess the ability of Canada's education and training systems to meet the challenges that lie ahead. Recommendations suggest the need for a comprehensive, open, relevant and responsive system, with the Council of Ministers working to secure the present and improve the future prospects for our children (Economic Council of Canada, 1992, p. 142). At the provincial level, educational leaders are mapping paths for the future with the creation of documents that analyze present conditions and make recommendations for improvement in the coming years.

In 1990, the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities prepared *Vision 2000: Quality and Opportunity* (1990), a report written "with a view to the year 2000 when a renewed and revitalized system of colleges of applied arts and technology will play a major role in meeting the growing demand for opportunities in career education" (p. 1). Through a collaborative process, 33 people with diverse backgrounds searched for a vision of the system for the next century. The forty recommendations presented to the government of Ontario are having, and will no doubt continue to have wide-reaching effects on policy, philosophical orientation, and teaching practice. Of note is the preamble to the recommendations which states: "Education has an essential role to play in the development of a world which is peaceful, environmentally sound, equitable and economically viable. Education should help to balance individual and community needs, and foster personal initiative and cooperation within human relationships based on mutual respect" (p.38).

A year later, in 1991, the Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education examined the ability of universities to adapt rapidly to the needs of a Canada that is and will continue to be increasingly dependent on the essential national resource of well-educated citizens. The Commissioner's Report (Smith, 1991) depicts a basically healthy system but also notes the undervaluation of the teaching mandate, related policy areas, and quality control issues. It also proposes solutions to help improve the status of teaching and add an essential measure of accountability in times of change (p.1).

The mandate to maintain and improve the quality of teaching and foster relationships built on trust challenges both experienced and new faculty. The diversity of the students in community college and university classrooms reflects the diversity in our society and poses distinctive new challenges to the system. Current trends reveal that post-secondary enrollment growth rates are high for visible minorities, students over twenty-five, part-time students and women. Within these diverse social groups the issue of inequality is of major importance to those concerned about institutionalized sexism, classism, and racism (*e.g.*, Gaskell *et al.*, 1989). Given such social diversity, how do administrators and teachers meet the needs, interests and aspirations of such students and get them to work in harmony?

Although there are many possible answers to such challenges, one possibility worth promoting and developing is the creation of positive learning environments within organizations and within classrooms. Decades of discussion and research on particular atmospheres or "climates" within organizations and classrooms consistently show that positive climates enhance student achievement (Knowles, 1984; Lezotte, 1979; Marzano, 1992; Moore, 1976; Weimer, 1990). The purpose of this article is to present background information on positive learning environments in organizations and classrooms, and to suggest ways for administrators and teachers to create such learning environments in higher education.

Positive Learning Environments in Institutions of Higher Education

Twenty years ago, Moore (1976) identified several factors that create an environment conducive to maintaining or improving instructional health and well-being within an organization:

- a climate of inquiry where the academic community has a sense of being joined together in the quest to discover more about effective teaching and learning
- a climate of clarity where leaders are clear and consistent in communicating expectations to faculty
- a climate of confidence wherein instructors feel they are being given opportunities to succeed
- a climate that recognizes and respects instructional diversity and the varying needs of students. (Moore, 1976)

As interest in this topic increased, Lezotte *et al.* (1979) clarified its usage by defining climate as the norms, beliefs and attitudes reflected in institutional patterns and behavioral practices that enhance or impede student achievement (p. 19). The climate within an organization can have a positive or negative effect on learning (Gaff & Wilson, 1979; Grabowski, 1983; Weimer, 1990). Further research also indicated the existence of variable departmental climates that can affect student learning. Baird (1988), Chickering, (1969), Biglan (1973), Kolb (1988) and Volkwein and Carbone (1994) all supported the claim that organizational subenvironments within the same institution can produce substantially variable influences on student development.

Recent work by Weimer (1990) also suggests that positive learning environments within organizations are important. Included in her suggestions for improving college or university teaching is a reference to the responsibility of administrators to create a climate conducive to learning. She suggests:

- College teaching can be improved, but not easily.
- Now is the time to make new or reaffirm old commitments to better teaching.
- Individual efforts to improve activities need to occur in some context via some process such as program review.
- There is no single right way to better teaching.
- The variety of instructional strategies should be respected.
- Institutions should work to create climates conducive to the ongoing quest for instructional quality.
- Efforts to improve should not be based on premises of remediation or deficiency.
- Participation in activities aimed at improving instructional competence should be the exclusive responsibility of the faculty members.
- Presidents, Deans, Academic Committees, Department Chairs and Faculty members all have a responsibility to create a climate conducive to learning and to strive for instructional excellence. (Weimer, 1990, 106-134)

The author adds that faculty members will teach better in climates which recognize and reward instructional excellence. In her view, better teaching is worth the effort since everyone benefits.

Recommendations for Improving the Climate in Institutions

Although the literature shows a variety of ways to develop and promote positive learning environments, organizations cannot simply adopt someone else's plan; they have to create an environment specifically to suit the needs and reflect the values of the institution. Recommendations to any organization presently considering implementation of programs to establish a positive learning environment should therefore include these suggestions:

- form a committee that includes people from all sectors of the institution
- analyze the culture of the organization
- examine the literature and evaluate existing policies
- decide what would work best within the budget
- determine timelines
- create a plan of action for the future.

Involvement of faculty through surveys, newsletters, presentations, workshops and encouragement of colleagues, along with recognition of effort and success, would strengthen the commitment to excellence in teaching. Faculty would have feelings of pride and loyalty to the educational institution that shares with them a common vision of a positive learning environment for all.

Positive Learning Environments in Classrooms

The definition of a positive climate in the post-secondary classroom is similar to the definition used within organizations. Borich (1988), for example, defines classroom climate as "the atmosphere or mood in which interactions between teacher and students take place. Classroom climate will determine the manner and degree to which a teacher will exercise authority, show warmth and support and allow for independent judgement and choice" (p.277).

In his adult education research, Knowles (1984) suggests that teachers of adults should understand adults as learners and possess knowledge about strategies for teaching adults.

He delineates the following basic principles of adult learning that all teachers of adults should know:

- adults maintain the ability to learn
- adults are a highly diversified group of individuals with widely differing preferences, needs, backgrounds and skills
- adults experience a gradual decline in physical and sensory capabilities
- the experience of the learner is a major resource in learning situations
- self-concept moves from dependency to independence as individuals grow in responsibilities, experience and confidence
- adults tend to be life-centered in their orientation to learning
- adults are motivated to learn by a variety of factors
- active learner participation in the learning process contributes to learning
- a comfortable, supportive environment is a key to successful learning (p.36).

Awareness of these principles help post-secondary teachers understand the students they are teaching, so that efforts to establish positive learning environments can be maximized.

In contrast to the content models employed by traditional teachers, the andragogical model advanced by Knowles is a process model. In the content model, the teacher decides what knowledge or skills should be taught, develops a sequence for presentation and selects a strategy for transmitting it. On the other hand, in the andragogical model, the teacher is a facilitator, consultant or change agent who prepares in advance a set of procedures for involving the learners in establishing a climate conducive to learning, planning with the students, diagnosing their learning needs, formulating program objectives, designing learning experiences, conducting the learning experiences with suitable techniques and materials, and evaluating the learning outcomes (p.117).

Knowles (1984) also contends that the first and prerequisite procedure teachers of adults must consider is the establishment of a climate that is conducive to learning. This means providing experiences that are positive, in classrooms where students feel comfortable, accepted and respected by teachers and other students in the class. This does not happen by chance. Teachers must make deliberate efforts to help students feel at ease by providing appropriate socializing activities that create relationships or feelings of trust and respect on the first day of class and throughout the whole course. When students feel supported, encouraged and have a sense of belonging to a group, they are better able to work cooperatively in an atmosphere of trust (p. 92).

Resources instructive in establishing a positive climate in the classroom include Loughlen and Martin, (1987) on the topic of literacy; McDonald and Cotroneo (1991) and Volkwein and Carbone (1994) on higher education; Knowles (1984), Knox (1986), and Darkenwald (1987) on the principles of adult education; and Orlich (1980), Borich, (1988), and Marzano (1992) on teacher education. Of interest to college and university teachers are the findings of McDonald and Cotroneo (1981) who found that "the instructor who fosters mutual respect between himself or herself and the student through setting clearly defined objectives, encouraging innovation, rewarding excellence, stressing cooperation, creating pride in accomplishment, and offering challenge, is likely to nurture achievement-oriented students. Mutual respect is undoubtedly the key to positive classroom climate" (p. 92). As a result of informal discussions with students, the authors determined positive and negative effects on classroom climate. Being open, honest and accepting of peoples' differences are major factors in establishing positive interpersonal relationships.

Research in this area continues. Vahala and Winston Jr. (1994) found that classroom climate varied by institutional type, and by discipline. They also found that students who perceived that they knew each other, cooperated with one another, and did not feel the environment was hostile or personally intimidating earned higher grades.

Recommendations for Improving the Climate in Classrooms

Although it is obvious that there has been a lot of research on what constitutes a positive classroom climate, the question still remains -- What can teachers in higher education do to create and promote positive climates in the classroom?. What ideas and activities would be practical?

A key factor is to get to know the students -- their

characteristics, interests, needs, aspirations, learning styles, and expectations. Before the course starts, teachers could inform themselves about the characteristics of adult students by reading literature on andragogy and by asking other teachers what they know about the students. To discover student interests, teachers could distribute an interest questionnaire or organize activities such as asking the students, sharing with a partner, making lists, or illustrating their interests. Learning about student needs includes determining physical, intellectual and social needs; hence, teachers should find out if students have physical handicaps, learning disabilities or social disadvantages. Knowing the aspirations of the students provides teachers with the means to motivate. Asking students to describe their background and their aspirations for the future helps teachers focus on each individual. Knowing the way students learn is also of vital importance for teachers to provide appropriate resources for the visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners. Distributing a learning styles inventory can help the students and the teachers become more aware of how they like to learn. *The Canfield Learning Styles Inventory* and *The Canfield Instructional Styles Inventory* are readily available surveys which can provide more in-depth information. Teachers should be aware of their own preferred teaching styles and share this information with the students. Finally, near the beginning of the course, teachers should ask all participants, through private conversation or through written comments, what they expect to learn from the course, in order to be able to adjust strategies and resources to meet their needs.

The first step toward maximizing the learning experience is, therefore, for teachers to determine the backgrounds of students. The second step is to implement activities that are positive and create trust. Typical activities include:

- getting to know student names by memorization, name tags or seating plans
- sharing personal information about yourself, your background, interests, aspirations and preferred teaching styles
- using a variety of ice-breakers such as "autographs," "name bingo," or "present the person next to you, sharing one thing this person really likes"
- ascertaining, then celebrating the diversity of ethnic backgrounds and languages within the classroom
- distributing and discussing in detail the course outline, learning outcomes, content, process, evaluation criteria, and due dates
- organizing simple communicative activities that stress the positive, such as discussing with a partner the best thing that has happened today, the funniest thing that happened last week
- working on building the individual's self-esteem by having students identify their strengths, skills they are good at, and nice things people have said about them
- developing students' appreciation of others by thinking and saying nice things about the people in the classroom
- having students learn to give compliments to others when good things happen in the classroom
- building team spirit by having students choose a name for the group to develop commitment and a sense of ownership and belonging
- paying attention to the dynamics of class discussion, in order to ensure fair treatment of all members.

Many of these activities take only a few minutes of class time, but help to establish a positive climate in the classroom.

Other resources that may be helpful include a practical binder for teachers of adults called *Teachers of Adults Program* published in 1988 through a joint project involving teachers from Cambrian, Algonquin and Sault Community Colleges (Swanson & Champion, 1988). It provides teachers and students with activity sheets to analyze learner characteristics and skills. It includes worksheets on conducting a self-assessment of personal skills and motivation; on identifying barriers; on facilitating the involvement of ethnic minorities; and on becoming aware of ways adults express positive and negative emotions and assessing personal learning styles. The production of this binder indicates that teachers at these community colleges in Ontario are aware of the importance of establishing positive learning environments and are showing initiative in the production of valuable classroom resources.

Conclusion

Responding to the challenges of *A Lot To Learn, Vision 2000* and the *Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education* will not be an easy task. Acknowledging our differences and getting people to work together in a positive, constructive way is one way to improve the quality of education. The intent of this article is to inform and assist administrators and teachers in creating positive learning environments in organizations and in classrooms. Positive learning environments can make a difference! It is important to examine carefully the kinds of climates that exist in institutions and classrooms to determine if the climate is likely to promote or detract from learning. Several additional possibilities for future action exist. First, in-depth studies of positive learning environments within organizations and within classrooms would be beneficial. For example, a study asking administrators and teachers who receive excellent ratings from colleagues and students how they personally establish positive climates would provide more insight and concrete examples. Second, formal studies could be conducted to determine how employees and students perceive the climate in the institution or the classroom. Third, the production and compilation of resources appropriate to college and university teaching and learning would facilitate the process of change to improve instruction. These materials could be used in induction programs for those entering the field or in professional development sessions for experienced teachers.

Social, demographic, and technological trends in the future will have an impact on teachers who wish to create positive classroom climates. Factors such as the increase in the number of older students and the emphasis on lifelong learning will necessitate further study of the characteristics of adults. Increasing diversity of the student body will necessitate further study of strategies to meet the needs of individuals. Technology and the shift from content to process will also necessitate different teaching strategies. In the future, teachers will be dealing not only with content and what they teach, but also with how they teach and who they teach. "Global learning" is another trend that will impact on climate. The steady increase in the number of foreign students choosing their education in North America and the increasingly multicultural base of our societies will create more complex cultural contexts within the classroom. The trend to "learners as consumers" will be of significance in an era of economic insecurity in which transfer payments are further constrained. Colleges and universities with good reputations and strong partnerships with the private sector will continue to attract students. Finally, the increase in the number of non-traditional students will lead to a diversity of program responses that is greater than ever before. Teachers entering the profession should be prepared to deal with this diversity in the classroom, and experienced teachers should increase their knowledge through professional development. The challenge of creating an environment of respect and trust between students and teachers is likely to become even more difficult. However, prospects appear promising for the future, particularly if we harness the energy, ingenuity, and enthusiasm of the "teacher of adults," defined by Grabowski (1983) as "a person who is people-oriented: more interested in people than things, more interested in individuality than conformity and more interested in finding solutions than in following rules" (p.87). Since teachers will be lifelong learners they will, no doubt, discover solutions for establishing positive climates within both organizations and classrooms. Such climates will certainly encourage the students of the future.

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Submissions consistent with the purpose of the CSSHE Professional File should be submitted to the editor. The Professional File is published up to four times per year by the CSSHE and is distributed free of charge to CSSHE members.

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